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# DIFFICULTIES CONCERNING PRAYER. I

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## **I. Difficulties Connected with a Supposed Scientific Viewpoint**

In the discussion of any spiritual theme in a generation in which the influence of natural science has been so momentous and so dominant as in ours, it is hardly possible to ignore the initial questions that arise from the scientific point of view. And with reference to prayer, it is well to remember, there is no reason why we should not recognize the scientific principle of the universality (but not "uniformity") of law—that there is law in every sphere of life. There is no doubt of laws and of our need of them, even from the religious point of view. For without a sphere of law it is plain that we could make no progress in knowledge or power or character; that the significance of freedom itself would depend upon the sphere of laws through which that freedom could express itself; and that without some abiding laws in the world we could not even maintain our faith in the trustworthiness of God.

But, on the other hand, we need to make it clear to ourselves that there is no sphere of eternally *self-existing* laws, or laws *preceding* all reality. Such a conception, it should be plain, is really unthinkable. We need clearly to see that law can "exist" only in one of two ways: either as the mode of activity of some existing reality or as a formulation made in the mind of some observer of the way in which this reality acts. It is

therefore impossible to speak of laws as preceding all existence, or as having any existence of their own apart from all really existent beings. It follows also that laws, as such, can *do* nothing. They cause nothing, they finally explain nothing. They are only our formulation of the way in which things act, or, in any final statement, of the modes of God's activity.

But as surely as there is no doubt of laws, and of our need of them, so surely is there no doubt either of our need of God and the sense of his presence and power and love back of all the world. If religion is to exist at all men need to be able to believe in a living God who can come into real and effective relations with his children, who is able to manifest himself to them, and able to adapt himself in love to their changing needs. And there can be no possible defense of the real rationality of the world if the moral and spiritual interests are not supreme. Here religion is at one with every ideal interest. For all ideal interests must insist that the world cannot be a mere machine, but must have meaning and worth. Its mechanism must be subordinated to great rational ends. Eucken speaks the inevitable conviction of the religious man when he says:

When, however, we put the question universally, showing at the same time that in ceasing to give life a spiritual basis we allow the purely humanistic culture an

undisputed right over the whole field, and that this culture has no effective way of dealing with the hollowness and illusions of existence, then to every thinking man the great alternative presents itself, the Either-Or. Either there is something other and higher than this purely humanistic culture or life ceases to have any meaning or value.

It may well be urged, too, that there is absolutely no compelling reason, philosophic or scientific, to deny the direct access of God to human minds. Men can hardly help reasoning: We have such access to each other's minds, can it be that He who made these minds and knows every avenue of approach to them has not such access? We can change the course of life of our fellow-creatures; can it be that God is powerless at this point? In one of his earlier works Pfleiderer naturally reasons to the same import:

And why should it be less possible for God to enter into a loving fellowship with us than for men to do so with each other? I should be inclined to think that He is even more capable of doing so. For as no man can altogether read the soul of another, so no man can altogether live in the soul of another; hence all our human love is and remains imperfect. But if we are shut off from one another by the limits of individuality, in relation to God it is not so; to Him our hearts are as open as each man's own heart is to himself; He sees through and through them, and He desires to live in them, and to fill them with His own sacred energy and blessedness.

To deny such access of God to the human mind is to deny the possibility of revelation, to deny prayer, to deny any living contact with God; practically to deny that there is any really living

concrete God at all. It is to go back to something very like the cast-off deism of the eighteenth century. It is hardly possible that religion should be able to maintain such a view of things. As Orr says: "The kind of theism that remains after the Christian element has been removed out of it is not one fitted to satisfy either the reason or the heart."

Evolution itself, too, seems to point to revelation and prayer—to a living association with God, in that its goal, so far as we can see, is man. And in man evolution has reached a creature in whom a new spiritual evolution begins; whose life is primarily in personal relations; that is, in relations of self-revelation and faith. Man is made, thus, one may well feel, for revelation, for prayer. And it would seem a very helpless God indeed who was unable to come into these relations of self-revelation and faith and so to meet our deepest needs.

Moreover, it is sometimes urged that prayer cannot be harmonized with the course of nature. But the objector needs to be reminded that no small part, and not the least important part, of nature is human nature, and that prayer most certainly does fit human nature. As Professor James said long ago, in his *Psychology*,

We hear, in these days of scientific enlightenment, a great deal of discussion about the efficacy of prayer; and many reasons are given us why we should not pray, whilst others are given us why we should. But in all this very little is said of the reason why we *do* pray, which is simply that we cannot help praying. It seems probable that, in spite of all that "science" may do to the contrary, men will continue to pray

to the end of time, unless their mental nature changes in a manner which nothing we know should lead us to expect.

What so fits human nature, what is practically inevitable to it, is intrinsically probable. On the other hand, any mere machine prevision, in which answers to prayer are wrought into the machine, utterly fails to meet the moral and spiritual needs of men. Our highest need, after all—the chief source of both character and happiness—is personal association. Are the divine association and response denied us? If they are, then it is the simple truth to say, as Browning frequently insists, that men can be more to us than God. That will be regarded as an impossible conclusion.

Now if these larger considerations are to be given any weight at all it is plain that we cannot admit that the scientific viewpoint compels us to turn prayer into what is simply a kind of spiritual gymnastics. If religion is to be possible at all the reality of effective relations between God and men cannot be denied—relations that involve actual response on God's part.

Nor, if such effective relations are to be supposed, can we narrowly fix the scope of prayer. Doubtless in the Christian view of prayer spiritual interests are always put above temporal interests. The very proportion of the petitions in the Lord's Prayer makes this emphatic. Doubtless, too, it will be increasingly true as a man goes on developing in the spiritual life and grows in prayer that the spiritual interests will more and more take the lead and occupy the main place in his communion with God. But the relation with God can hardly be the

real and adequate and vital thing it ought to be if it is on any ground to be assumed that one may not bring all things to God. I cannot doubt, here, that a rather mechanical conception of the world, which has naturally come into the foreground of this scientific generation, has produced for many minds what is, after all, a bugbear of the religious life. The universe is not a machine with which nothing can be done. Even if we were assuming the same kind of finite and partial relation to the world on God's part that holds of men, we should hardly be able to infer that God's relation must leave him less able to accomplish results than we ourselves. Let us be sure that if religion has any rational basis at all, God is not dead or powerless.

Nor is it well for us to adopt some *a priori* theory of prayer, on supposed scientific grounds, that would rigidly exclude all temporal requests. However sure we are that the spiritual interest must be the dominant interest in prayer, and however clear it is to us that in prayer we are to seek God and not things, we simply must pray concerning that which disturbs our peace; else, as Herrmann has somewhere suggested, our prayer is not a really honest prayer; it does not truly represent us. As he says:

Whatever really so burdens the soul as to threaten its peace is to be brought before God in prayer, with the confidence that the Father's love understands even our anxious clinging to earthly things. . . . If we try of ourselves to get free from these, and so far do not pray about them, we do ourselves a twofold injury. In the first place, we make our prayer dead and insincere; it is

in truth not our own prayer at all, but might be the prayer of a man placed in utterly different conditions; and secondly, we do not really lay ourselves before the God who would be sought of us as our Helper and Saviour; we rather imagine a God who has a kind of love for the human ideal, but has no sympathy for our needs.

Obviously, if our religion is to be conterminous with our life and permeate the whole of it, we simply cannot put all our common life out of touch with God. We are not, therefore, to limit prayer to what we ourselves see that it is possible for God to do. Even in our human relations it would be a foolish child that would so limit his requests of his father. We are not very wise at

best as to the possibilities in this universe of ours, and we need not be afraid of embarrassing God.

On the other hand, there is obviously a great possible abuse of prayer in pressing purely temporal requests with God. No personal relation can bear a dominant selfish interest in the *things* which the friendship may bring. It will surely not be less true in our relation to God that we shall utterly spoil the relation if we think of it as primarily a means to temporal results. God is no mere reservoir of good things, nor is prayer an infallible way of obtaining them. As Trumbull long ago insisted, what men need is faith in God rather than "faith in prayer."

## AESCHYLUS AND THE EIGHTH-CENTURY PROPHETS

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Since we have begun to treat the writings of ancient Israel as genuine literature growing out of the experience of the people and expressing their interpretation of life, very little attempt has been made to appreciate the Hebrew or Greek through any detailed comparison of the one with the other. It has indeed been noted that "true historical literature had a wholly independent origin only among the Israelites and Greeks,"<sup>1</sup> but a detailed comparison of the rise and significance of historical writing in

the two has not, I think, been undertaken. Nor, as far as I am aware, has a thorough comparative study as yet been made of the lyric poetry of these two, who are almost as unique in the ancient world through the worth of their song as through the originality of their recording of history.

In other departments of composition each people made highly distinctive contributions to the world's literature. Hebrew prophecy and Greek drama may stand as supreme representatives.

<sup>1</sup> Eduard Meyer, *Geschichte des Alterthums*.